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CHRISTIAN UNITY

ILLUSTRATED

AND

RECOMMENDED,

FROM THE

EXAMPLE

OF THE

PRIMITIVE CHURCH.

A SERMON,

PREACHED BEFORE THE SYNOD OF GLAS-
GOW AND AYR, AT GLASGOW, October
14th, 1766.

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GLASGOW.

PRINTED AND SOLD BY R. AND A. FOULIS

PRINTERS TO THE UNIVERSITY

M.DCC.LXVI.



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CHRISTIAN UNITY ILLUSTRATED
AND RECOMMENDED FROM
THE EXAMPLE OF THE PRIMITIVE
CHURCH.

ACTS IV. 32.

AND THE MULTITUDE OF THEM THAT BELIEVED, WERE OF ONE HEART, AND OF ONE SOUL: NEITHER SAID ANY OF THEM, THAT OUGHT OF THE THINGS WHICH HE POSSESSED, WAS HIS OWN, BUT THEY HAD ALL THINGS COMMON.

WHAT an amiable, interesting view of the gospel spirit, does this account of the primitive church afford? And, how does it serve to expose, reproach, and condemn the behaviour of its professors, almost ever since? Alas! far from being of one heart and one soul; there is, in comparison, little, very little of either: and, instead of not looking on the things which Christians then possessed, as their own; whilst there was any instance of distress or indigence around them; there has, but too generally, gone forth a spirit of selfishness, exceeding hurtful to our holy religion. Indeed, there have always been, and now, perhaps as much as in any former age, there still are many glorious examples of the contrary. But,

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as a prevailing national mark, or, as what has justly served to characterize any age of the church, save that which was strictly apostolical, may well be disputed. Let us, however, endeavour to profit, by the contemplation of that one: and, even to profit, by contrasting it, in our own minds, with the sad, the almost incredible number of its opposites. This is a subject wherein every Christian believer has concern; at the same time that it seems peculiarly adapted to the design of such a meeting of the ministers of Christ: for, what single thing can be of so great use to his church, as to stir up one another, by friendly counsel, and example, to cultivate that spirit of love and union, which is, undoubtedly, the most distinguishing law in our holy Christian profession? And, what single thing, without exception, would so eminently tend to advance the important ends of our ministerial office? To the servants of the Lord Jesus, in that particular station, it certainly belongs to lead the way to their several flocks, in restoring the golden age of the primitive church; when the
' Multitude of them who believed, were of one
' heart, and of one soul: neither said any of
' them, that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things
' in common:' and, in the full assurance that the subject would be highly acceptable to my

reverend fathers and brethren; I have now presumed to speak upon it.

My method, in humble dependance upon God, shall be; 1st, To explain the different parts of this amiable, primitive example: and, 2dly, To propose a few counsels of union; which, thro' divine grace, may help to bring us somewhat nearer, at least, to that glorious and happy state.

1st, It is proposed to explain the different parts of this amiable, primitive example. 'The multitude of them who believed, were of one heart, and of one soul:' they were, in judgment and affection, so much the same, that scarce any difference was perceivable among them: they had no animosities, no dissensions; but spoke, and walked by the same rule. They were, even as our blessed Lord prayed for his disciples, John xvii. 22. 'made perfect in one.' But, we must illustrate the two principal things, in this primitive union, separately.

1st, 'The multitude of them who believed,' were, as to all the great articles and points of faith, one. Indeed we cannot say, that ever they thought of reducing all minds to the same level, in every thing; without the least regard either to capacity, or means of improvement. If their union had depended upon any such thing; we would, probably, never have heard of it. But, their wisdom and piety together,

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convinced them that no such perfect union was to be expected, in this world: and, that for the ends of religion and happiness, it was, in no ways, absolutely needful. The great fundamental articles of belief, were sufficient to bind them together. And, as concerning these, they did not differ, nor, indeed, could they well be divided, in their judgment, from each other: for, if we look back to the verses immediately preceeding our text; and, consider what it was that the apostle Peter laboured with the Jews, both in the way of argument and miracle working; we shall find, that his principal aim was, to bring them to a conviction of their guilt, in rejecting the Messiah; to true repentance for that, and all their former wickedness; to such firm belief of the divine mission of the Son of God, as would determine them heartily to embrace, and profess his religion; to abide by it all the days of their life. Such was the faith of the primitive Christians: and, by publickly owning that faith, in their baptism, they were added to the church. They were, also, closely united to one another. The apostles of our Lord sought no more, though they were inspired: and ‘The multitude of them that believed,’ were satisfied with; yea, rejoiced in it. Happy souls, who stood so firm and close, upon the alone foundation, Jesus Christ! When shall such

wisdom and goodness return to our earth again? When shall the narrow, separating hedges of each party-contrivance be set aside, by the pure, healing spirit of Christian moderation; to make way for enlarging the church of God, in one entire, beautiful field of his own dressing? This, sure, is worthy to be sought after; worthy to be prayed for; worthy to be endeavoured, by all the true friends of the Lord Jesus.

But, 2dly, 'The multitude of them that 'believed,' in the early age of the church, were one, in love and affection; as well as judgment. This, though near as great a rarity even among Christians, as what we were last considering, is both more important, and more in every bodies power. God hath set bounds by the degrees of reason, the variety and measure of his gifts, to the lengths of wisdom and knowledge which each of us may acquire. But, he hath set no such bounds to our kind, benevolent regards. The very best effect of our agreement in mind or opinion, is its being subservient to the interest of mutual affection. And, besides the natural obligation we are under to be of one heart, as men, there are many others of new and greater weight, as Christians, which we ought to consider, and of which we ought to feel the influence. The divine religion we profess, was the fruit

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of pure, disinterested goodness, upon the part of God, even the Father. The publication and establishment thereof, at so much expence of suffering to Jesus Christ; argued the power of affection in him, to a degree quite unexampled before. The very heart and soul, as one may say, of all his doctrines, precepts, and promises, is to secure the same great end. Indeed, the commandment of love, is our Lord's commandment, by way of eminence: his new and great commandment: the very badge of discipleship, whereby we may easily be read and known of all men. Accordingly, this blessed proof did 'the multitude of them ' that believed,' give, in the earliest age of the church. They drew attention and respect, even from their enemies, by the whole of their good behaviour: but, they commanded, in a sort, their admiration, by mutual affection and good offices. For, unbelievers themselves, we are informed, would oftentimes say, behold the Christians, how they love one another! How willingly, how liberally they do good to one another! How cheerfully, how stedfastly they suffer for the common interest! They are not as many hearts and souls, in different people; but as though they were all animated with one heart and one soul! How pleasant, useful, and worthy of our imitation, Christians, was such a behaviour? How natural to

be expected from the various and strong bonds of love, made known to us, by the gospel? One of the more learned heathens, I remember, says, in a familiar epistle of his to a friend; 'Our love must grow, must continue; because we are linked together, by literature, morals, frame, and the dying voices of mankind.' But, how would the ardor of his soul, have been raised, by the addition of such circumstances as these, in Eph. iv. from verse 4. 'One body, one spirit, even as we are called in one hope of our calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all; who is above all, and through all, and in all.' Our love must grow, must continue; because we are linked together by the same belief, the same profession; we draw in the same yoke, we fight the same battles, we encounter the same difficulties, we are supported by the same precious promises, we look for the same glorious, and everlasting reward. If we should now suffer, and even die together; we shall surely meet again; we shall meet in the regions of the blessed; we shall meet to live and reign together, there, in an eternal friendship. I see not how the force of such arguments can be resisted, if they are but duely attended to: and, by these arguments, the excellent primitive Christians, were united to one another, in close, inviolable affection,

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To compleat the amiable example, it is added, in the 3d and last place; ‘Neither said any of them that ought of the things that they possessed was their own, but they had all things in common.’ Upon which particular, it may be proper to observe, 1st, That the things here spoken of, must be understood of such things only, as were lawful to be possessed, or enjoyed in common; according to the other commands of that same divine religion which they believed. Our sacred writer, in a parallel place of this same book, viz. chap. ii. 44, 45. verses, after informing us, that all who ‘believed were together, and had all things in common;’ thus explains himself, ‘and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need.’ Upon which passage, and the text together, the words of Tertullian, that eminent, ancient apologist, for the Christian religion, may be considered as an admirable commentary. They are, in substance, to this purpose. ‘Christians are brethren, in name; and their practice is quite conformable thereunto: they mix kindred souls together: they mix the goods of fortune together: they only withhold that, which the practice, and, in some cases, the philosophy, yea, and even the religion of the Gentiles doth permit to be common.’ Now, the believers in the

pure, no less than generous religion of the Son of God, did then love one another, with a chaste and boundless affection. They had all things, thus limited, by reason, and the plain, positive commands of their own divine religion, in common.

And, concerning this last expression, it may be proper, 2dly, To observe, that, though the laws of Christian friendship are still the same, and would be sure, in the precise same way, to influence true believers, yet the situation of things, at that time, was quite peculiar. For they who were converted to the gospel, from the Jewish and Heathenish religions, were, in the beginning of their faith, and could not otherways be, without a miracle, but imperfectly versed in the nature, doctrines and rules of our Saviour's kingdom. They had (and that was enough to qualify them for baptism, and being received into the bosom of the church) abundant evidence set before them, that Jesus Christ was the Son of God, and Saviour of the world; that he died, that he rose again, that he would come, in the end of time, to confer eternal life upon all his faithful followers. But still, many other great principles and rules of conduct were needful to be known, needful to carry on, and to compleat the Christian character. The communication of these principles and rules, required

a farther; and, in some cases, a very long series of teaching. The poorer sort, in particular, full of the prejudices, errors, and corruptions of their former, unconverted state, needed very much to be put in mind of the evil of them; to be refreshed and strengthened with the accounts of their privileges, from day to day; and, to be instructed and warmed with the obligation of their manifold Christian duties. And, all this, it is manifest, till a more regular and settled state of things could be accomplished, would be very hard upon the worldly circumstances of those, whose daily subsistence depended upon the labour of their hands. Now, what, in such an emergency, could either be a nobler act of beneficence, or plainer call of duty, than for the richer sort to do as they did? to feel, and say, in the gratitude, the warmth of their affection for Jesus Christ, and for the poor believers, their brethren, in Jesus Christ; 'That nought of the things which they possessed, whilst this continued to be the case, was their own; but that they should have all things in common.' To pretend that this practice of the primitive saints should form a law, to be observed by all Christians, in all succeeding ages, would be very absurd and dangerous. Nevertheless, the example of their charity, may still be of singular use. It ought to teach Christians, to live to-

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gether, as in the closest possible union of judgment and affection; so, likewise, in the closest intercourse or communication of worldly goods, when they happen to be needed: and, that no pretence to the Christian character, and hope, can possibly be well founded, without this: for, 'Who so hath this world's good, 1 John iii. 17. and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?' It is impossible. Therefore, adds the apostle, verse 18. 'My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue, only; but, indeed, and in truth.' This is to be conformed to the spirit of those primitive Christians, 'Who had all things in common.' And, to use the words of a noble writer of our own country; 'I don't know that the human soul, in its present embodied state, is capable of a much higher perfection, or any thing that argues a nearer approach to the divine attributes.'

Thus have we gone through the several parts of this most amiable, early example. And, I doubt not, what has been said, may serve to confirm the melancholy observation, with which we entered upon our subject: viz. that betwixt the church of Christ in those days, and the professed church of Christ in ours, there is a wide, an affecting difference.

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I do not speak of those only, who, under a most splendid, catholic name, have introduced the most abominable corruptions and cruelty together, but even of many Protestants themselves. For, it is a truth too plain, and melancholy, that numbers, if not all of them, have, at times, been guilty of great indiscretions. They have not only divided, in their judgments, as might have been expected in smaller matters, but likewise divided in their affections upon the account of these. They have set limits of their own, both to Christian and ministerial communion. They have even been led to persecute such as they would not, or thought they could not admit into their society; at least, to deny them privileges, which, as sincere, faithful believers, for any thing they were sure of to the contrary, was their undoubted, scriptural right. Hence, have arisen variances, emulations, strifes, heresies, in the church; and the multitude of them who profess to believe, have been rather less known from the union of their hearts and souls, their judgments and love, than from their differences, hatred, and division. These things will hardly be refused; and, as they cannot well be thought of, or spoken, without grief, so, it may be hoped, that each of us, in our respective stations, will contribute what we can, to restore and ca-

crease the signs of that amiable, primitive spirit, we have now been contemplating. With which view, as proposed, in the

2d Place, I would beg leave, in the temper of humility and affection, which is proper to such a subject, and such an audience; to lay down a few counsels of union, that, through divine grace, may be of some use to bring us nearer, at least, than we have been, to the glorious and happy state of the early Christian church. These may concern both ministers and people. The ministers of the gospel are, by their religion and office together, under a peculiar obligation to lead the way to Christian union. And, to this good work, the following things seem to be very useful, if not absolutely necessary. 1st, Allowing to all who profess the faith of our Lord's divine mission and word, the name of Christian. 2dly, Keeping at the greatest distance from spiritual dominion over the belief and consciences of their brethren. 3dly, Guarding against the abuse of their Christian liberty, by rashly and unnecessarily publishing to the world any new or singular opinions of religion, which they may have formed. And, finally, managing all their discourses, whither public or private, more especially indeed the former, with great simplicity of language, and freedom from wrath.

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Ist, I say, ministers of religion should lead the way to union, by allowing to all who profess the faith of our Lord's divine mission and word, the name of Christian. This perhaps may appear to some of less importance than it really is, and, on that account, may deserve a little more attention from us. You know what a just and severe reproof the opposite practice drew from one of Christ's apostles; 1 Cor. i. 12. 'Now, this I say, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul, and I of Apollos, and I of Cephas, and I of Christ. Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you? or, were ye baptized in the name of Paul?' And again, in the 3d chapter of the same epistle, from the 3d verse. 'For ye are yet carnal: for, whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal; and walk as men? For, while one saith, I am of Paul, and another, I am of Apollos; are ye not carnal? Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers, by whom ye believed, even as the Lord gave to every man?' If it was wrong to be divided, even so far as to desire, and assume a name from such worthy, successful ministers of Christ, one need scarcely say how much more improper, and even criminal it is, to desire and assume a name from any succeeding teacher of his. The Christian name is the undoubted right of all who believe

in the Lord Jesus; who profess that faith or religion which he has published; and hope to be saved through him alone. It is unwarrantable to withhold it from any, who acknowledge and rejoice in these principles; and seems to represent them as being very different, both in sentiment and practice, from what they really are. The church of God, as described in 1 Cor. i. 2. consists of those, 'Who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all that in every place, call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord;' or, as some do rather choose to translate the last part of the verse, 'are called by the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.' It is a profession of faith in Christ as head over all things to the church, with a decent outward conversation, that entitles men to be considered as the members of his body, to be denominated from him. And, if this obvious rule of justice had been always observed, the effects thereof would have been very happy. Some sects, perhaps the far greatest part of them, would either not have been known in the world at all, or would have been quickly swallowed up in the name and love, which, notwithstanding any smaller differences, each of them held to be common. It is the affixing of names to people, with a design to stigmatize, and render them suspected, that has sadly molested the

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peace of the church. The name of the Lord Jesus sounds well to every true follower of his, and if, where the right of others to it appears, by the integrity of their conduct, to be equal to our own, we would be just and kind enough to give it them, the spirit of discord and animosity would be very much restrained.

2dly, The ministers of religion, are bound to lead the way to union, by keeping at the utmost distance from spiritual dominion over the faith, and consciences of their brethren. 'Neither, says the apostle Peter, 1 Ep. v. 3. 'as being lords over God's heritage; but being ensamples to the flock.' And, his beloved brother Paul, to the same purpose; 2 Cor. i. 24. 'Not for that we have dominion over your faith, but are helpers of your joy: for, 'by faith,' that is, by sincere, private, personal conviction, 'ye stand.' After such declarations as these from those who were divinely inspired, to claim the dominion of peoples faith and conscience, is highly unreasonable; and, to comply with it, is both foolish and wicked. It is, in effect, to set aside real infallible authority, and to substitute that which is weak and fallible in the room of it. From thence, too, come divisions, heresies, strifes very calamitous. Our blessed Lord foresaw this, and therefore expressly enjoined, Math.

xxiii. 9, 10. 'That we should call no man father upon earth, because one is our Father, who is in heaven: neither to be called masters, because one is our master, even Christ.' Jesus, the Son of God, he is Lord of all; Lord of our conscience, Lord of our faith; and now, he administers his government, by the written rule of his word: this rule is open and free to all, even the teachers of it themselves are not under a pretence of interpreting what it contains, to introduce their own authority, to usurp mastery and dominion. No, they are, in all humility and diligence, to assist their brethren, but not to impose their interpretations upon them. The hurt which has been done to truth and love, by affecting spiritual dominion, is scarce to be imagined, by those who are ignorant of the history of the church: and those, who are in any tolerable measure acquainted with that history, will need no other argument to fall in with the counsel of union and peace, which I now propose. They will rejoice in the liberty wherewith Jesus Christ has made them free; they will steadfastly adhere to it, in their own practice; and they will publish far and wide, as their influence can reach; 'That the supream judge, by which all controversies of religion, are to be determined; and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men,

‘ and private spirits are to be examined, and in
 ‘ whose sentence we are to rest, can be no o-
 ‘ ther but the Holy Spirit, speaking in the
 ‘ scriptures: that, in regard all councils and
 ‘ synods, since the apostles times, whither ge-
 ‘ neral, or particular, may err, and many have
 ‘ erred; therefore, they are not to be made
 ‘ the rule of faith, or practice; but to be used,
 ‘ as an help in both.’ Thus we see the wisdom
 and modesty of our own church: and by this,
 no doubt, the wisest and best of her teachers
 will ever think it their duty, to propose their
 own interpretations, and likewise to explain
 all the other acts, decrees and rules, which,
 from the time of adopting that confessional
 help, have, or may yet proceed from her.

In the 3d place, ministers of religion, in or-
 der to promote Christian union, will think
 themselves bound, to guard against the abuse
 of their Christian freedom, by rashly and un-
 necessarily publishing to the world any new,
 or singular opinions in religion, which they
 may have formed. Many people have it in
 their power to strike out something new, ei-
 ther in the matter or method of illustrating
 different points of religion. And it is well
 known, how fond they commonly are of their
 own inventions. These without due care and
 modesty, will be apt to dazzle and mislead
 them, and to prevent the exercise of a sober

judgment. And therefore, when thoughts of this sort arise, they should be carefully weighed, they should be sifted to the bottom: and, when all has been done that can be done by the authors themselves, the advice of their more experienced, judicious brethren, ought to be taken. Such humility and prudence, would have prevented many crude notions from coming abroad into the world, whereby men's minds have been perplexed, and their passions irritated. Pride and rashness have very much obstructed the progress of truth, and have destroyed, in many instances, the union and concord that ought to subsist among men. It were easy to produce examples; but to save your time, I shall only mention what the apostle Paul says in his 1 Ep. to Tim. i. 6, 7. 'That from a pure heart, and a good conscience, and faith unfeigned, those men have swerved and turned aside unto vain jangling, who desire to be teachers of the law, understanding neither what they say, nor whereof they affirm.' And again, 3d chapter of the same epistle and 6th verse; 'That a novice, or one newly come to the faith, as it is in the margin, is apt to be lifted up with pride, and so to fall into the condemnation of the devil.' It is a great and dangerous mistake, to think we ought to publish and propagate, whether by writing or preaching, every thing we know.

Truth itself, and union much more, may depend upon our silence for a time. To every thing, says Solomon, there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: among the rest there is a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; and the choosing of that season which is fittest, to the best of our knowledge, is a material part of our Christian duty. It is withal owing to the circumstances I have just now mentioned, a part of our duty somewhat difficult. The people of most genius and labour, have not always the greatest command of themselves in this particular. But I observe that, only to make such the more attentive, not to discourage them. It might be of use before they declare themselves to the world, to reflect whether the objections in the way of what they have to propose may be easily removed; and whether, even then, they may be clearly proven to be of importance to salvation. In the first instance, viz. if the objections can be easily removed &c. there is little or no danger of public strife: and in the other, viz. if they can be clearly &c. let a person be ever so modest, yet charity itself will not suffer him to be silent; and however troublesome the consequences may be, he is sure to be approved of God at the great day. Happy they in any station, and more particularly in that of the holy ministry, who can say with one of our

own order when they come to die; ' That
 ' they avoided with the utmost caution to pro-
 ' pose or teach any thing which they had not
 ' before, upon the most careful examination
 ' of the scriptures, found to be agreeable to
 ' them; and that they had studied to inculcate
 ' every thing which might tend to the pro-
 ' motion and enlargement of the truth of Chri-
 ' stianity, the true worship of God, the com-
 ' mon interests of piety and virtuous conver-
 ' sation among men; and in short, to that
 ' state of peace and tranquillity according to
 ' the word of God, which becomes the Chri-
 ' stian name.'

4th, To conclude, the ministers of religi-
 on are further bound to lead the way to Chri-
 stian union, by managing all their discourses,
 whether public or private, more especially in-
 deed the former, with great simplicity of lan-
 guage and freedom from wrath: by simplicity
 of language, I mean that which is most agree-
 able to the word of God, and which in mat-
 ters of pure divine revelation may be clearly
 warranted thereby. The introduction and
 continuance of words and phrases invented by
 men, has been a mean of long, and sore
 trouble to the church. It is a labour almost
 for life to be fully instructed in them; and the
 zeal of great numbers in the Christian world,
 has been more attached to these than to any

thing else. From whence do usually arise discord, reviling and wrath, in all their disagreeable forms. 'If any man, says Paul to Timothy, 1 Ep. 6th chapter from the 3d verse, 'teach otherways than I have taught and commended to you, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness; he is proud, or, as the original word may be translated, a fool, knowing nothing, but doting about questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmising, perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness: from such withdraw thyself.' The apostle here points out to us the most common source of such disorders, namely, the supposing that gain is godliness, or that religion may be prostituted to our own private gain or secular interest. For it often happens that the rejecting of scripture simplicity, and making a great noise with words and phrases that are popular or much in vogue, though they are nowhere found in the whole word of God, is one of the most successful means of promoting self-interest; but that sordid motive, instead of lessening, doth exceedingly aggravate the guilt. People should tremble to use such freedoms with divine things. As the weakness of

God is stronger than men, and in the early ages of the gospel, did subdue philosophers and mighty princes themselves in great numbers unto Christ; so the simplicity of his word was the glorious instrument thereof. ‘The spoiling of that word through philosophy and vain deceit, after the traditions of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ,’ has been a great obstacle to the like success, as well as to union among those who believe in the subsequent ages of the church. The truths of God can never be spoken in fitter language, than the infinite wisdom of God hath devised; and the more faithfully that all his teachers adhere to this sacred rule, even in the very phrase itself, as to what things are peculiar to revelation, the nearer certainly they will approach both to truth and love, and the ends of their sacred office and place will be the more effectually answered.

As to words of human wrath or passion in discourses of religion, more especially such as are of a public nature, I know nothing that can be alledged in the defence of them. They are both improper and prejudicial. They give just ground of suspicion, that either we are in the wrong ourselves, or that we have no better means of defence in our power. For, what men despair to maintain by argument, they commonly seek to uphold by passion: this cre-

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ates prejudice, and diverts the attention from the subject under consideration, and often fills the minds of the hearers with contempt: whereas a modest gentle stile is both most suitable to truth, and most conciliating to the ends of the speaker. 'The sweetness of the lips, says Solomon, Prov. xvi. 21. increaseth learning.' It disposes people to attend, to open their ears to instruction; it insinuates itself into the mind, and engages all the best affections of the soul upon the side of truth. 'Every man, says he in another place, shall kiss his lips, that giveth a right answer.' And such should be the manner of all Christ's servants. Their regard to the union and conviction, and good lives of the believers, demands a mild agreeable manner from them. 'The servant of the Lord, says Paul, 2 Tim. ii. 24, 25, 26. must not strive; but be gentle to all men, apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth; and that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will.' Even in the rebukes or censures of a minister, there ought to be great tenderness and caution. The softness of their language should seem to say to the offender; 'My poor unhappy brother, I

‘pity you, I seek your good, I wish and hope
 ‘there may be no longer need of any such
 ‘means.’ If those who have been overtaken
 with errors and faults, had been wrought up-
 on in a spirit of gospel meekness, there would
 . have been fewer examples of obstinacy to
 complain of, and fewer sad signs of hatred
 and division among professing Christians. But
 some people are so full of the goodness of
 their cause, and so immoderate in their zeal,
 that they behave as though these alone could
 justify, or alleviate what is most unchristian;
 I mean, a bad temper. The best of all teach-
 ers, was the meekest that ever was in the
 world; and he condescends upon that qualifi-
 cation expressly, Math. xi. 29. both to recom-
 mend himself as a teacher, and to be an ex-
 ample to others. ‘Learn of me, says he, for
 ‘I am meek and lowly in heart.’ I beseech
 you, brethren, by the gentleness of Christ, that
 ye regard this instruction. And forasmuch as
 one part of our office, at meetings for consult-
 ing and judging in the affairs of the church,
 obliges us often to dispute about things of no
 clear evidence upon either side, let us not at
 any time by the loss of our temper, do more
 to disgrace and hurt the cause of religion,
 than by all our appearances in that way, we
 can possibly do good. If we receive a bitter
 sarcasm, invective, or railing accusation, we

are not to emulate people in their speeches of that sort: for, to have the better of them in such things, is indeed, to be worse than they; because it is to be most unlike to Jesus Christ, whose pattern, as before said, is that of meekness.

I should next proceed to offer a few counsels of union to the ordinary hearers of the gospel more directly. But, I am sensible there is need of an apology, for having already detained you so long. Yet, as the subject is of importance, and always too necessary, I will depend upon a favourable hearing for some little time further; and will only illustrate the two following particulars. 1st, And as the foundation of all, that mutual charity, or love, is of the highest moment in religion. And next, that for preventing discord, or curing it, there is no such mean, as being close employed upon holiness of heart and life.

1st, I say, and as the foundation of all, that mutual charity or love, is of the highest moment in religion. It is the 'End of the commandment, the bond of perfectness,' and preferable to any, yea, to all the most splendid gifts imaginable without it. For, thus the apostle to the Corinthians 1 Ep. xii. 31. after a very full enumeration of those miraculous gifts, which distinguished the early days of the gospel, adds, 'And yet I shew unto

‘you a more excellent way;’ viz. the way of charity or love. And concerning this illustrious, comprehensive grace, he declares, chap. 13th from the beginning; ‘Though I speak with the tongues of men and angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass or tinkling cymbal: and though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have no charity, I am nothing.’ It ought not therefore, brethren, dearly beloved, to be a small matter, or one of doubtful importance, that should tempt any person to violate the great law of love. Our zeal itself, under the direction of knowledge, which is indeed the only true and valuable zeal, will teach us always to regulate our affection to things by the evidence and moment of them. And as there is no one thing in religion which can pretend to more evidence, or of which the Holy Ghost hath spoken with so great earnestness as that of charity or love; so every thing that seems to oppose, or counteract its influence, ought with the utmost care to be avoided.

It is not enough, for example, to separate ourselves either from the church, or from one another, because this and the other minister of the Lord’s word, hath not all the

qualities of knowledge and utterance which are to be found in some others of the same great office. For neither, even then, ‘ When
 ‘ the multitude of them who believed, were of
 ‘ one heart, and of one soul, were all apostles,
 ‘ all prophets, all teachers, all workers of miracles; but one had the gift of healing, another spoke with tongues, another did interpret them.’ Yet all these, we are assured, 1 Cor. xii. 11. ‘ Worked one and the same spirit, dividing to every one severally as he willed.’ Whence the apostle nobly and powerfully argues for close union and love among all the members of Christ’s mystical body; ‘ That there should be no schism in it, but that each of them should have the same care one of another.’ He would seem there, and in other places of his epistles, to insinuate that the best interest both of the whole body and of individual members, was more effectually maintained by that variety, which did then, and does still displease some, than by conferring an equal degree of perfection upon all: and that, therefore, a modest denial of private taste, in many instances, is most necessary both to prove the duty and affection of a sincere Christian.

Nor, again, is it enough to warrant strifes and dissensions among Christian people, that all have not an equal power in the choice and

establishment of fixed pastors among them. For, allowing the grievance to be even greater than it is, yet who can say, that is a grievance easily redressed? Or who does not see, that with all the imperfection complained of, we both may, and actually do enjoy, upon the whole, a ministry that is worthy of encouragement and attendance? There have been days of greater power to the people in the choosing of their pastors before these. But then, how were they improved? Alas! the few peaceable fruits of righteousness among us are a sad evidence, that if God had rendered our condition still more unfavourable in this respect than it is, he would have punished us less than our iniquities have deserved; and that therefore, as things now are, our duty and interest both lye in gratefully improving the advantages which his kind providence hath continued to us. Only think with yourselves, Christians, if God had seen fit to try our land with the dreadful scourge of persecution; if, in search of a place and society for the public worship of God, we had been hunted, as some of our excellent fathers were, from field to field, and from house to house; would we not then have regarded with true and just affection, those valuable helps, which are now offered to many, and by them, alas! most shamefully neglected and set at nought? For my

own share, I can never think of that terrible passage in the prophet Amos, viii. chap. from 11. verse, without trembling at the wantonness expressed by such people, in putting far from them the food of life: ‘Behold, the days
 ‘ come, saith the Lord God, that I will send
 ‘ a famine in the land, not a famine of bread,
 ‘ nor a thirst of water, but of hearing the
 ‘ words of the Lord: and they shall wander
 ‘ from sea to sea, and from the north even to
 ‘ the east, they shall run to and fro to seek
 ‘ the word of the Lord, and shall not find it.’ True indeed, some rare cases may be attended with peculiar hardships, and may deserve compassion; but what can be said to justify the ingratitude and wantonness of many people in other cases, who having an abundance of spiritual provision set before them, seem desirous only to show how much they slight and despise it? I pray God they may hear, and give glory to his great name, lest he be provoked as is threatened, Mal. ii. 2. ‘To
 ‘ send a curse upon them; yea, to curse their
 ‘ blessings.’

Nor, finally, is it enough to warrant strife and divisions among Christians, that some of them, perhaps not a few, do differ from us in our way of thinking upon many particulars, in the common rule of our faith and manners. For what else is this than may be ex-

pected, as was observed in the beginning of this discourse, from such a variety of parts, gifts, and educations, as obtain in the world? The upright of all ranks, ages and conditions of life, must enquire for themselves. God hath bound it upon their consciences. And it is just as unlikely if they do so, that in the smaller, as well as greater things of religion, they should be quite the same, as that in people living under different degrees of heat, there should be the precise same colour or complexion. Here, charity and mutual forbearance come in to make the structure of the Christian body compleat: and the whole word of God, the New Testament in particular, abounds with precepts to that purpose. ‘Him that is weak in the faith, Rom. ‘xiv. 1. receive you,’ that is, be familiar and intimate with such an one; converse often together, ‘but not to doubtful disputations;’ or as it is in the margin, not to judge his doubtful thoughts. ‘For who art thou that judgest ‘another man’s servant? to his own master ‘he standeth or falleth: yea, he shall be holden up: for God is able to make him stand. ‘We then that are strong, ought to bear the ‘infirmities of the weak, and not to please ‘ourselves. With all lowliness and meekness, ‘with long-suffering, forbearing one another ‘in love; endeavouring to keep the unity of

‘ the spirit in the bond of peace.’ Such charity is plain and essential: other things about which people too often divide, are by no means either so essential or plain. Charity is possible, but agreement of mind in all cases is absolutely impossible. The instances of God’s compassionating and pardoning the mistakes of his honest enquirers throughout the scripture, are various; but according to the same scripture, ‘ He that loveth not his brother, abideth in death: 1 John iii. 14. He that hateth him is in darkness, and walketh in darkness, and knoweth not whither he goeth, because darkness hath blinded his eyes.’

To conclude, 2dly, for preventing discord or curing it, there is no such mean as being close employed upon holiness of heart and life. ‘ This is the one thing needful: the better part which can never be taken from us;’ this is the ultimate end and glory of the grace of God; ‘ to teach men, that denying ungodliness, and worldly lusts, they should live soberly, righteously and godly in this present world. The kingdom of God is righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost.’ These obligations are so clearly and variously expressed, that there is not any the smallest room for doubt; ‘ And he that in these things serveth Christ, Rom. xiv. 18. is accepted of God and approved of men.’ If we are but

in earnest to be acquainted with these several parts of pure and undefiled religion, there will be little time and less inclination left for what is doubtful and contentious. The weightier things of the law will make such light, unimportant things fly at a distance from them, like the morning cloud before the rising sun. Then sincere Christians of every denomination, making Jesus Christ the peace, the life, the soul of all their actions, of all their purposes, will mingle, as an old lively writer expresses it, ‘ The sweetness, the meekness which he loves, and which he is, in all their undertakings: they will set their several controversies to Christ, and see how near they can meet in him, so as to be good friends and brethren to one another: the precious corner stone which reconciles man to God, will reconcile and unite them close to one another: they will not, cannot live at a distance, who both live by resemblance, now, in the bosom of Jesus Christ, and rejoice in hope that they shall speedily meet and reign together with him, the prince of peace, in the eternal mansions above.’

And now, since such is the native tendency of the gospel religion to promote and cherish the best affections, the best endeavours to be useful to mankind, is it not unfair in the enemies of that divinely benevolent doctrine,

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to charge it with the errors of its professed friends? We do not refuse the charge of wrath, animosities and dissensions among great numbers of them. I would to God we honestly might. But we refuse, and have just cause to blame the abettors of infidelity for urging the inconsistent lives of Christians, and particularly their bitter and cruel ones, as a valid argument against the scheme of pure benevolence which they profess. Let them with ever so nice and critical an eye, examine the Christian scheme as it lyes in the New Testament, and see if they can find the least allowance for a wrathful, uncharitable disposition in it. If they cannot, then surely the gospel is free from any degree of blame in what so often happens among those who profess the faith of it.

But since they will not be so just as to lay the blame where alone it ought to be laid, it certainly concerns all the true friends of Christianity to put even this appearance of an objection out of their power, to lay aside prejudice and passion, evil designs and projects of ambition, pride, covetousness, and the like; all corruptions of, or additions to the simple doctrine of Jesus Christ; and with a fervour of spirit proportioned to the greatness of the work, and guided by all the prudence and judgment we are masters of, to follow out the

glorious practical design of the gospel. Such means of putting an end to strifes and divisions among Christians, will certainly succeed; and when this method obtains generally, the divine scheme of the gospel will have few or no enemies. This is agreeable to what our Saviour teaches in John xvii. 23. where he makes the faith of his mission and the success of his religion in the world to depend upon this single thing, 'That they may be one even as we are one, I in them and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one; and that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them as thou hast loved me:' the same thing in substance with what he had before declared in the 21. verse, 'That they also may be one in us, that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.' People may pretend zeal for the interest of our dear Saviour; but by whatever marks they endeavour to manifest it, if their zeal be without love, every thing else is gross delusion or hypocrisy, and hypocrisy extremely prejudicial to our common Christianity. The Father of lights and of all grace will not accept of any thing as an act of zeal for himself, which violates charity toward our brethren. Jesus his beloved Son is among all, who sincerely believe and profess his divine mission and word: and he will, when his time comes, most certainly

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break down those separating walls among the brethren, so as to make them all glad of the common honourable name, Christian, without any of them affecting or imposing upon others the hard, uncharitable names of envy and subdivision. The season will come, when, as Bishop Hooker said, ‘ A few words spoken
 ‘ with meekness and humility and love, shall
 ‘ be more acceptable than volumes of contro-
 ‘ versies, which commonly destroy charity, the
 ‘ very best part of true religion. Then shall
 ‘ the world know and believe that God did
 ‘ send Christ unto them.’ I beseech you, brethren, to live to the honour of this divine religion; ‘ Being of one heart, and of one soul;
 ‘ ready to distribute, willing to communicate:’ and join to these your endeavours, serious, frequent prayers for the ‘ Peace of Jerusalem: they shall prosper that love her. Now
 ‘ unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think,
 ‘ according to the power that worketh in us;
 ‘ unto him be glory in the church, by Christ
 ‘ Jesus, throughout all ages, world without
 ‘ end. Amen.’



F I N I S.